

MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S CAPABILITIES APPROACH: HUMAN FLOURISHING, JUSTICE, AND DIGNITY

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Abstract

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach has emerged as a transformative framework for understanding human flourishing, justice, and dignity within contemporary political philosophy and development ethics. Building upon the works of Aristotle, Amartya Sen, and Kant, Nussbaum advances a normative account of justice grounded in the provision of substantive opportunities that enable individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. Central to her theory is the list of ten central capabilities, which encompass essential domains such as life, bodily health, practical reason, emotions, affiliation, and control over one's environment. By shifting the focus from economic growth and resource distribution to what individuals are actually able to do and be, Nussbaum offers a holistic vision of well-being that integrates autonomy, equality, and respect for human dignity. This article critically examines the philosophical foundations of the capabilities approach, its divergence from Sen's philosophical thought, and its normative implications for distributive justice and human rights. It further explores the approach's practical relevance for policymaking, particularly in areas such as gender justice, poverty reduction, education, disability rights, and social inclusion. While acknowledging criticisms concerning cultural relativism, universality, and potential paternalism, the article demonstrates the enduring relevance of Nussbaum's framework for rethinking justice in a pluralistic and interconnected world. Ultimately, the capabilities approach provides a powerful lens for promoting human dignity, expanding freedoms, and ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

Keywords: capabilities approach , human flourishing, justice, human Dignity, development Ethics

Introduction

In an age marked by unprecedented technological advancement, growing economic interdependence, and persistent social inequalities, the question of what constitutes a truly just and dignified life remains both urgent and unresolved. Across cultures and nations, individuals face stark disparities in access to health care, education, political freedoms, and economic opportunities. While global development indicators such as GDP growth, poverty rates, and literacy levels seek to capture human progress, they often fail to reflect the deeper realities of human flourishing. People may live in wealthier nations yet lack the substantive freedom to lead lives they value, while others in resource-rich environments remain excluded from the very conditions necessary for a dignified existence. This paradox calls for a framework capable of addressing not only the material distribution of resources but also the qualitative dimensions of well-being, human dignity, and justice. It is within this context that Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach emerges as both a groundbreaking philosophical paradigm and a practical tool for rethinking the foundations of social justice.

The pursuit of justice and human flourishing has long preoccupied philosophers, political theorists, and development scholars. From Aristotle's virtue ethics and Kant's moral

imperatives to John Rawls' liberal egalitarianism and Amartya Sen's early capabilities framework, diverse intellectual traditions have sought to define the parameters of a good life and a fair society. Yet, despite their immense contributions, these theories have significant limitations. Utilitarianism tends to reduce human well-being to aggregate happiness, overlooking the pluralistic nature of human aspirations. Rawls' distribution of primary goods assumes uniform capacity among citizens to convert resources into meaningful opportunities, thereby neglecting the realities of structural inequalities, disability, gender, and social exclusion. Kantian ethics, while illuminating the concept of dignity, often remains too abstract to guide policy, while Sen's capabilities framework, though revolutionary, deliberately refrains from specifying the core entitlements necessary for a dignified life, leaving policymakers without clear guidance.

These theoretical inadequacies create a pressing research and policy gap: how can societies secure justice and dignity in a way that reflects the full spectrum of human diversity, provides normative clarity, and translates into actionable strategies? Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach answers this challenge by offering a comprehensive, human-centered, and operational framework that integrates philosophical depth with empirical relevance. Unlike traditional welfare-based or resource-driven models, Nussbaum focuses on what individuals are actually able to do and become their substantive freedoms rather than simply on what they possess. Central to her approach is a definitive list of Ten Central Capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment, which she argues are essential thresholds for human dignity. This provides a concrete, normative foundation for assessing justice and guiding public policy, bridging the gap between abstract ideals **and** real-world applications.

The significance of this research lies not only in its philosophical richness but also in its global and practical relevance. Nussbaum's framework has influenced development paradigms worldwide, informing the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), guiding constitutional reforms in countries like India and South Africa, and shaping debates on gender equality, disability rights, education, and environmental justice. By centering the concept of human dignity and recognizing the plurality of human needs, her approach resonates across cultural, political, and economic contexts, making it uniquely suited to address twenty-first-century challenges.

The research problem this article addresses is how Nussbaum's capabilities approach redefines justice and human dignity by emphasizing substantive freedoms rather than material resources or abstract rights. The central objective is to critically examine the philosophical foundations, normative commitments, and practical implications of Nussbaum's framework, highlighting its transformative potential in reshaping modern development discourse. Despite extensive contributions from classical and contemporary philosophers on justice, human flourishing, and dignity, there remains a significant research gap that Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach uniquely addresses, making it superior to previous frameworks. Earlier theories, such as utilitarianism, Rawlsian justice, Kantian dignity, Sen's procedural capabilities framework, and various human rights theories, fall short in providing a comprehensive, normative, and operational model for promoting human well-being. Utilitarian theories prioritize aggregate happiness without adequately considering the intrinsic value of individual freedoms or the diversity of human needs, while resource-based approaches like Rawls' *Theory of Justice* focus primarily on the distribution of primary goods, assuming equal capacity among individuals to convert resources into well-being. This fails to account for structural inequalities caused by factors such as gender, disability, cultural background, and social status. Similarly,

Kantian and human rights theories emphasize human dignity but often remain abstract, offering little practical guidance on what specific entitlements are necessary to secure a dignified life. Even Amartya Sen's foundational work on capabilities avoids prescribing a concrete list of essential freedoms, leaving policymakers without clear benchmarks for measuring justice or human development.

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach fills this gap by providing a normative, human-centered, and context-sensitive framework that integrates ethical theory, political philosophy, and empirical relevance into one cohesive model. Unlike previous frameworks, Nussbaum grounds her approach in the idea that justice must focus not only on the distribution of resources but also on what individuals are actually able to do and become their real freedoms and opportunities. Through her list of Ten Central Capabilities including life, bodily health, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment she provides a substantive account of the essential entitlements that every human being must have to live with dignity. This list offers policymakers a clear, operational standard by establishing thresholds that all individuals should meet, thereby bridging the gap between abstract philosophical ideals and practical implementation. Her approach also integrates feminist insights and disability rights, ensuring that issues of structural marginalization, social exclusion, and capability deprivation are addressed more effectively than in earlier theories. Furthermore, unlike purely theoretical models, Nussbaum's framework has been widely applied in development studies, human rights policies, and global welfare assessments, influencing tools such as the United Nations' Human Development Index and guiding constitutional reforms in several countries.

This study, therefore, critically examines Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as a superior paradigm for understanding human flourishing, justice, and dignity. It highlights how her model transcends the limitations of earlier theories by offering a normative yet flexible framework that accommodates diversity, advances social justice, and provides actionable guidance for policymakers and scholars alike. By integrating ethical reasoning with developmental concerns, Nussbaum not only redefines the meaning of justice but also equips societies with the tools to transform abstract ideals into measurable realities. In doing so, this research underscores the urgent necessity of adopting a capabilities-based perspective in shaping policies, institutions, and social practices aimed at securing the dignity and flourishing of every human being

2. The Philosophical Foundations of the Capabilities Approach

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach is deeply rooted in a rich philosophical tradition that integrates classical insights with modern theories of justice and human development. Her framework draws significantly from Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, Amartya Sen's capability theory, Stoic cosmopolitanism, and Kantian dignity, culminating in a distinctive normative vision that prioritizes human flourishing, dignity, and agency over utilitarian or purely resource-based approaches.

2.1. Influence of Aristotle's Concept of Eudaimonia

Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia often translated as human flourishing *or* the good life forms a central foundation of Nussbaum's thought. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle emphasizes that the good life consists not merely in acquiring wealth or pleasure but in fulfilling one's rational and social capacities in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 2009). Nussbaum adapts this Aristotelian ideal by arguing that human beings possess basic capabilities that must be nurtured for flourishing to occur. Unlike Aristotle, however, she extends the concept of flourishing to

encompass universal entitlements grounded in human dignity, thereby detaching it from rigid cultural and political hierarchies embedded in Aristotle's original framework.

2.2. Engagement with Amartya Sen's Capability Framework

Nussbaum developed her approach in close dialogue with Amartya Sen, whose major work, *Development as Freedom*, introduced the capability framework as an alternative to traditional welfare economics (Sen, 1999). Both philosophers agree that development should be evaluated based on what individuals are actually able to do and be rather than merely by measuring resources, income, or utility. However, while Sen deliberately refrains from prescribing a definitive list of capabilities to allow for cultural pluralism, Nussbaum (2011) advances a specific list of ten central capabilities she considers necessary for living a life of dignity. This divergence highlights Nussbaum's more normative orientation, grounded in universal ethical claims rather than Sen's more comparative and evaluative focus.

2.3. Role of Stoic Cosmopolitanism and Kantian Dignity

Nussbaum's framework also incorporates insights from Stoic cosmopolitanism, which envisions a universal moral community where every individual, regardless of origin, possesses equal worth (Nussbaum, 1997). This cosmopolitan ideal underpins her insistence on the universality of basic capabilities and her rejection of purely culturally relative notions of justice. Complementing this, Kant's conception of dignity rooted in the idea that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end (Kant, 1996) provides a moral grounding for Nussbaum's emphasis on respecting and protecting the inherent worth of every person. Together, these perspectives strengthen her claim that justice demands securing threshold levels of substantive freedoms for all.

2.4. Nussbaum's Normative Grounding: Capabilities over Utility, Resources, or Rights

Nussbaum rejects approaches to justice that focus solely on utility maximization, resource distribution, or formal rights. She critiques utilitarianism for allowing situations where individual suffering may be justified for aggregate welfare (Mill, 1863), arguing instead for a model that ensures non-negotiable thresholds of well-being (Nussbaum, 2011). Similarly, she departs from Rawlsian justice, which prioritizes the fair distribution of primary goods, by asserting that equal resources do not guarantee equal opportunities for flourishing due to variations in human needs and contexts (Rawls, 1999). Furthermore, while she acknowledges the importance of legal rights, she contends that rights without substantive capabilities are insufficient for ensuring dignity and freedom. Thus, Nussbaum's approach places human capabilities the genuine opportunities to choose and act at the heart of social justice. In synthesizing Aristotelian flourishing, Sen's developmental insights, Stoic universalism, and Kantian dignity, Nussbaum constructs a comprehensive ethical framework that redefines justice beyond material wealth and formal entitlements. Her capabilities approach positions human dignity and agency as the normative foundation for political arrangements, social policies, and global development priorities.

3. Central Tenets of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach represents a comprehensive framework for evaluating well-being, justice, and human dignity by focusing on what individuals are actually able to do and to be. Unlike theories centered on economic growth, resources, or abstract rights, Nussbaum argues that social justice must secure for every person a minimum threshold of essential capabilities required for a dignified and flourishing life. This section examines the core features of her approach: the distinction between capabilities and functionings, her ten central capabilities, and the normative justification for a threshold-based model of justice.

3.1. Capabilities and Functionings

At the heart of Nussbaum's framework is the distinction between capabilities and functionings. Drawing on Amartya Sen's terminology, she defines functionings as the achieved states of being and doing such as being educated, healthy, or politically active while capabilities represent the real freedoms or opportunities to achieve those functionings (Nussbaum, 2011, Sen, 1999;). For example, the capability for political participation refers to having access to voting rights and the freedom to engage in civic activities, even if one chooses not to exercise these options. Nussbaum emphasizes that genuine justice must provide substantive freedoms, not merely formal rights or resource allocations, thereby expanding the scope of human agency (Nussbaum, 2000).

3.2. The Ten Central Capabilities

Nussbaum proposes a list of ten central capabilities that she considers universally necessary for a life of dignity. These are not mere policy recommendations but normative entitlements grounded in the inherent worth of every human being:

1. Life – Being able to live a normal length of life without premature death.
2. Bodily Health – Access to adequate nutrition, shelter, and healthcare.
3. Bodily Integrity – Protection from violence, sexual assault, and restrictions on movement.
4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought – Freedom to use the mind through education, creativity, and cultural participation.
5. Emotions – Capacity to form attachments and experience love, grief, and compassion.
6. Practical Reason – Ability to form one's conception of the good and critically reflect on life choices.
7. Affiliation – Opportunities for social interaction, respect, and non-discrimination.
8. Other Species – Respect for and coexistence with animals, plants, and the natural environment.
9. Play – Ability to engage in recreation and leisure activities.
10. Control over One's Environment – Political participation and economic autonomy, including property rights and employment opportunities.

For Nussbaum, the absence of these capabilities undermines human dignity and perpetuates structural injustice. She stresses that securing them is not optional but a matter of basic political morality (Nussbaum, 2011).

3.3. Threshold vs. Maximization Debate

A distinctive feature of Nussbaum's approach is her insistence on capability thresholds rather than maximizing capabilities. While utilitarian frameworks aim to maximize aggregate welfare (Mill, 1863), Nussbaum argues that justice requires ensuring everyone achieves a minimum standard of central capabilities, regardless of societal averages. For instance, a country's economic success is ethically insufficient if vast populations remain excluded from education, healthcare, and political participation. This threshold-based model reflects her Kantian commitment to dignity, recognizing that each individual possesses an inviolable worth that cannot be sacrificed for collective benefit (Kant, 1996). Moreover, it distinguishes her position from Rawls's theory of justice, which focuses on distributing primary goods (Rawls, 1999). Nussbaum contends that equal resources do not guarantee equal opportunities, since personal circumstances and social contexts determine how effectively individuals convert resources into functioning lives.

3.4. Normative Implications

By placing human capabilities at the center of justice, Nussbaum challenges conventional development metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and argues for a shift toward evaluating real freedoms (Nussbaum, 2011). This perspective has influenced global policies, notably the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), which incorporates health, education, and living standards beyond economic wealth (Alkire, 2002). Her framework thus provides an ethical foundation for addressing poverty, inequality, gender injustice, and social exclusion in both local and global contexts.

4. Human Flourishing and Dignity in Nussbaum's Framework

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach is fundamentally concerned with creating the conditions for human flourishing while securing the inherent dignity of every individual. Unlike theories of justice that focus narrowly on resource distribution or aggregate welfare, Nussbaum (2011) defines justice in terms of ensuring that all individuals possess substantive opportunities to live meaningful, autonomous, and fulfilling lives. Her framework draws from classical and modern philosophical traditions while offering a normative and practical vision for achieving human well-being in diverse social and political contexts.

4.1. Human Flourishing as the Core of Justice

The concept of human flourishing is central to Nussbaum's capabilities theory and originates from the Aristotelian idea of eudaimonia the realization of one's potential through a life of virtue and meaningful activity (Aristotle, 2009). However, Nussbaum adapts Aristotle's account to modern pluralistic societies, where flourishing is not tied to a single conception of the good but is understood as the ability to choose among a variety of meaningful life paths (Nussbaum, 1992). By emphasizing agency and autonomy, she links flourishing directly to having access to capabilities, rather than prescribing specific ways individuals must live. In this sense, justice requires that governments and institutions secure threshold levels of essential capabilities, enabling individuals to make informed life choices while respecting diverse cultural and personal values (Nussbaum, 2011). Without these opportunities, individuals cannot fully realize their humanity, and society fails in its moral obligation to support human potential.

4.2. Dignity as the Foundation of the Capabilities Approach

Nussbaum places human dignity at the heart of her theory, grounding it in a Kantian moral framework. Kant (1996) famously asserts that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means to an end. Nussbaum builds on this by arguing that dignity entails securing the conditions necessary for people to exercise their practical reason and live according to their values. The ten central capabilities she proposes represent the minimum entitlements required for a life compatible with dignity (Nussbaum, 2011).

Moreover, her framework rejects utilitarianism, which can justify sacrificing individual dignity for collective welfare (Mill, 1863). For Nussbaum, dignity is non-negotiable: any policy or system that undermines fundamental capabilities such as bodily health, education, political participation, or freedom of expression constitutes a violation of justice, regardless of broader social gains.

4.3. Comparison with Sen, Kant, and Rawls

While Nussbaum's approach developed in dialogue with Amartya Sen, it differs significantly in its normative grounding. Sen (1999) focuses on expanding people's capabilities but avoids prescribing a universal list, allowing for cultural variation. Nussbaum, by contrast, defends a

specific, universal set of central capabilities, arguing that they are grounded in shared aspects of human dignity and thus applicable across contexts (Nussbaum, 2011).

Comparatively, Rawls's theory of justice prioritizes the fair distribution of primary goods, such as rights and resources, but assumes individuals have equal ability to convert these goods into well-being (Rawls, 1999). Nussbaum criticizes this assumption, highlighting how social, biological, and structural inequalities affect people's ability to achieve flourishing. Similarly, while Kant provides the moral basis for respecting autonomy, Nussbaum operationalizes dignity by linking it to concrete, measurable capabilities, bridging the gap between moral theory and practical policy.

4.4. Integrating Flourishing, Dignity, and Social Inclusion

Nussbaum's framework situates human flourishing and dignity within broader concerns about social justice and inclusion. By emphasizing capabilities rather than resources, she highlights the ethical responsibility of societies to eliminate structural barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and systemic oppression that restrict individuals' opportunities (Nussbaum, 2011). This perspective has informed development policies globally, influencing frameworks such as the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), which now integrates health, education, and living standards alongside economic measures (Alkire, 2002). Thus, the capabilities approach offers not only a theoretical model but also a practical tool for advancing justice, ensuring that each person's inherent dignity is respected, and enabling individuals to lead lives of agency, purpose, and well-being.

5. Capabilities and Justice: A Political Perspective

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach presents a distinctive political theory of justice that prioritizes securing the substantive freedoms necessary for individuals to live lives of dignity and flourishing. Unlike traditional theories focused primarily on the distribution of resources, Nussbaum (2011) argues that true justice requires guaranteeing every person threshold levels of essential capabilities, regardless of social or economic status. Her framework challenges dominant paradigms within political philosophy, including Rawls's justice as fairness, utilitarianism, and rights-based theories, by offering a more inclusive and context-sensitive vision of human development, equality, and empowerment.

5.1. Justice as Ensuring Basic Capabilities

Nussbaum conceptualizes justice not simply as fairness or equality of resources but as ensuring that all individuals have the real freedom to achieve valuable life functionings (Nussbaum, 2011). The state, she argues, has a moral and political obligation to secure minimum thresholds of central capabilities such as life, health, education, political participation, and economic autonomy for everyone. Without these thresholds, individuals are systematically excluded from participating fully in social, political, and economic life.

This marks a departure from utilitarian approaches, which often prioritize maximizing overall happiness even at the expense of individual well-being (Mill, 1863). Nussbaum contends that such frameworks fail to safeguard the inherent dignity of vulnerable groups, since they can justify policies that benefit the majority while neglecting the marginalized (Nussbaum, 2000). Her capabilities theory thus frames justice as non-negotiable entitlements grounded in respect for human dignity.

5.2. Critique of Rawls's Theory of Justice

Nussbaum's political theory develops partly in response to John Rawls's influential model of justice as fairness. Rawls (1999) emphasizes the equal distribution of primary goods such as rights, income, and opportunities on the assumption that individuals are similarly situated and can convert these goods into flourishing lives. Nussbaum challenges this assumption by highlighting the "conversion problem": people differ significantly in their ability to transform resources into functionings due to factors such as disability, gender, social exclusion, and structural oppression (Nussbaum, 2011).

For example, two individuals with equal income may have vastly different life opportunities if one suffers from chronic illness while the other is healthy. Rawls's framework, Nussbaum argues, lacks the necessary sensitivity to human diversity, whereas the capabilities approach focuses on ensuring that all individuals actually possess the freedoms required to flourish, irrespective of personal or contextual disadvantages (Nussbaum, 2006).

5.3. Capabilities, Equality, and Distributive Justice

Nussbaum's approach reframes distributive justice by shifting attention from material equality to opportunity equality. While resources and income remain important, they are not sufficient indicators of well-being since people's needs vary across biological, social, and environmental contexts (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999;). Justice, therefore, demands substantive equality, ensuring that all individuals can convert available resources into meaningful functionings.

This emphasis on capabilities has significant policy implications. For instance, securing education, healthcare, and freedom from violence becomes as critical as providing income or property rights. In this way, Nussbaum aligns her framework with human rights discourse, extending the notion of justice beyond national boundaries to encompass global justice, where every person's dignity warrants protection regardless of citizenship (Nussbaum, 2006).

5.4. Implications for Human Rights and Global Justice

Nussbaum's capabilities approach bridges the gap between theories of justice and human rights frameworks. While rights articulate legal protections, she argues that they are insufficient unless people have the real capabilities to exercise them. For example, the right to education is meaningless without access to schools, qualified teachers, and learning resources (Nussbaum, 2011). Thus, capabilities complement rights by providing the material and social conditions necessary for effective freedom.

Furthermore, Nussbaum extends her approach to global justice, emphasizing that every individual, irrespective of nationality, deserves a life of dignity (Nussbaum, 2006). Drawing on Stoic cosmopolitanism, she advocates for cross-border ethical obligations, particularly in addressing poverty, gender inequality, disability rights, and environmental justice. In this respect, her theory resonates strongly with international development policies, influencing frameworks such as the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) (Alkire, 2002).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach thus offers a transformative vision of justice that prioritizes human dignity and well-being over material wealth or aggregate welfare. By focusing on substantive freedoms, it reshapes the foundations of distributive justice and integrates political philosophy with practical global policy.

6. Evaluation

While Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach has been widely celebrated for redefining justice, dignity, and human flourishing, it has also attracted significant criticisms and sparked scholarly debates. Central concerns focus on the potential paternalism of her proposed list of capabilities, the tension between universality and cultural relativism, the balance between collective rights and individual freedoms, and divergences between Nussbaum and Amartya Sen regarding the nature of freedom and agency. One of the most common critiques of Nussbaum's approach concerns its normative universality and potential for paternalism. By proposing a fixed list of ten central capabilities as universally necessary for human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011), critics argue that Nussbaum risks imposing Western liberal values on culturally diverse societies (Robeyns, 2005). For example, the capability for bodily integrity or gender equality might conflict with local customs, traditions, or religious norms in certain societies. Nussbaum responds by clarifying that her approach is not about dictating specific functionings but rather about ensuring real opportunities for individuals to choose their own lives (Nussbaum, 2000). In other words, while the capability list provides minimum thresholds for dignity, it respects pluralism by leaving room for different expressions of well-being within diverse cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the concern remains that governments or development agencies might instrumentalize the list to enforce external values, thereby undermining local autonomy.

Closely related to the paternalism debate is the tension between universality and cultural relativism. Nussbaum insists that certain basic capabilities such as access to healthcare, education, and freedom from violence are universally non-negotiable because they stem from the equal dignity of all human beings (Nussbaum, 2011). Her position resonates with Kantian ethics, which holds that all persons must be treated as ends in themselves (Kant, 1996). However, critics argue that the universality claim overlooks contextual differences in cultural practices, social priorities, and conceptions of the good life (Deneulin, 2002). For instance, societies may interpret the value of affiliation or play differently depending on historical, economic, or religious contexts. Nussbaum defends her approach by distinguishing between foundational capabilities, which are universal, and contextual implementation, which can be adapted according to local norms and values (Nussbaum, 2006). Still, the debate continues, especially in international development policy, where cultural sensitivity is critical.

Another key debate concerns the relationship between collective rights and individual freedoms within the capabilities framework. Critics note that Nussbaum's list emphasizes individual entitlements, such as bodily health, education, and autonomy, but pays relatively less attention to collective goods like cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, or community identity (Claassen, 2016). This raises the question: can individual capabilities be fully realized without collective capabilities? For example, the capability to control one's environment politically and economically often depends on collective action, such as democratic participation, social movements, or ecological stewardship. Nussbaum acknowledges this interdependence in her later works, particularly regarding environmental justice and the capability of "other species", but she maintains that the primary focus of justice must remain on securing individual dignity (Nussbaum, 2011).

Although Nussbaum's capabilities approach emerged in dialogue with Amartya Sen, important philosophical divergences remain between the two thinkers. Sen conceptualizes capabilities as the range of freedoms individuals have to achieve valued functionings beings and doings they have reason to value. However, he deliberately avoids proposing a fixed list of capabilities,

arguing that such a list should emerge from public reasoning within specific cultural and political contexts.

In contrast, Nussbaum defends a universal, normative list, claiming that without clearly defined entitlements, governments and institutions lack a solid framework for policy design. While Sen prioritizes agency the ability to pursue one's own conception of the good Nussbaum emphasizes minimum thresholds of dignity, even if individuals choose not to exercise certain capabilities. For example, a person may choose to remain uneducated despite access to schools; for Sen, this would represent agency in action, while for Nussbaum, justice still requires ensuring the opportunity to be educated regardless of personal choice (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). This highlights a fundamental philosophical tension: Sen privileges freedom, whereas Nussbaum foregrounds dignity.

These debates reveal the strengths and limitations of Nussbaum's capabilities approach. While critics caution against overgeneralization and cultural imposition, supporters argue that her framework provides a concrete, rights-sensitive model for advancing human well-being globally. The dialogue between Nussbaum and Sen, in particular, continues to enrich philosophical and policy discussions on development ethics, global justice, and human dignity. In practice, the challenge lies in balancing universal entitlements with cultural diversity, securing individual freedoms alongside collective goods, and integrating capabilities into policy frameworks without imposing external values. These tensions reflect the broader struggle within political philosophy to reconcile ethical universality with contextual sensitivity in a pluralistic world.

Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach represents one of the most significant contributions to contemporary political philosophy and ethics, reshaping our understanding of justice, human dignity, and human flourishing. Emerging from her engagement with Aristotelian eudaimonia, Amartya Sen's development theory, Stoic cosmopolitanism, and Kantian dignity, Nussbaum offers a distinctive framework that moves beyond traditional theories grounded in utility, resources, or rights (Nussbaum, 2011). Her central insight is that true justice cannot be measured merely by aggregate wealth, economic growth, or formal equality; instead, it must be evaluated based on what individuals are actually able to do and be their substantive freedoms.

Nussbaum's list of ten central capabilities including life, bodily health, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's environment provides a normative benchmark for assessing human well-being and dignity. By focusing on capability thresholds, she argues that societies have an ethical and political obligation to secure for all citizens the conditions necessary for flourishing, while still respecting individual diversity and choice (Nussbaum, 2000). In this sense, Nussbaum redefines justice not as the mere distribution of resources or opportunities but as ensuring the real freedoms people need to live a dignified life. One of the enduring contributions of Nussbaum's work is its global relevance. In an increasingly interconnected world marked by inequality, climate change, gender injustice, and technological disruption, the capabilities approach offers a human-centered paradigm for development policy, social inclusion, and global governance. For instance, debates on gender equality and women's rights have drawn significantly from Nussbaum's emphasis on bodily integrity, education, and political participation as non-negotiable elements of justice (Nussbaum, 2006). Similarly, her focus on environmental sustainability and the capability of "other species"

anticipates urgent ethical questions concerning climate justice and intergenerational responsibility.

Furthermore, Nussbaum's framework has profound implications for policy-making. It urges governments and international institutions to go beyond measuring progress through GDP or economic growth alone. Instead, policies should evaluate whether individuals genuinely have access to the freedoms and opportunities necessary for a meaningful life. Development indices like the Human Development Index (HDI) and Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), inspired partly by Sen and Nussbaum, already reflect this shift toward more holistic metrics of well-being. However, there remains a need for deeper integration of capabilities-based assessments into the design and evaluation of education policies, healthcare systems, gender-sensitive reforms, and climate adaptation strategies (Robeyns, 2017). Nevertheless, Nussbaum's approach is not without challenges. Critics raise concerns about paternalism, cultural relativism, and the feasibility of implementing a universal list of capabilities across diverse contexts. Yet, Nussbaum herself addresses these tensions by distinguishing between the universal value of core capabilities and the context-specific ways in which societies might realize them (Nussbaum, 2011). This flexibility enables the framework to remain normatively robust while practically adaptable, making it especially relevant for pluralistic and multicultural societies.

Looking forward, the capabilities approach holds immense promise for shaping ethical discourse and public policy in the 21st century. In an era defined by global crises—ranging from rising inequality and forced migration to the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence—Nussbaum's model provides a compelling foundation for addressing issues of justice, human dignity, and agency. Integrating capabilities into international law, sustainable development frameworks, and governance mechanisms could strengthen efforts to promote equity and inclusive progress worldwide. In conclusion, Nussbaum's capabilities approach challenges policymakers, philosophers, and global leaders alike to rethink justice not as abstract equality but as the real freedom to flourish. It calls for a moral and political commitment to building societies where every individual has the opportunity to live a life of dignity, autonomy, and meaning. By bridging ethical theory and practical governance, Nussbaum offers not just a philosophical vision but also a transformative framework for realizing human potential in a rapidly changing world.

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